



Focus

Water Quality Antidegradation Implementation Plan

The Washington Department of Ecology is proposing to revise several key aspects of the state's surface water quality standards. This focus sheet provides a summary of the proposed revisions relating the antidegradation section of the rule (No. 6 of 8).

What is “antidegradation”?

Antidegradation describes a process that helps prevent unnecessary lowering of water quality in lakes, rivers, and marine waters, and protects clean water for people, industries, and fish. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires all states to develop rules and programs to protect water bodies against degradation, or harm. As directed by the federal Clean Water Act, states not only are required to protect uses (such as swimming, boating, and fish habitat), but also must “restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biologic integrity of the nation’s waters.” This means that, where water quality is better than the assigned water quality standards, it should not be degraded without first determining that lowering of that water quality is necessary and in the overriding public interest. The antidegradation implementation plan establishes a formal process for accomplishing this important national goal.

What does the antidegradation implementation plan do?

Washington’s antidegradation plan follows the framework of the federal regulation on antidegradation, and has three tiers of protection:

1. Water quality necessary to protect existing and designated uses of a water (such as swimming, boating, and fish habitat) must be maintained and protected.
2. Where a water is demonstrated to be of a higher quality than a criterion assigned to that water, the water quality must be protected at the higher level unless the department determines that a lowering of water quality is necessary and in the overriding public interest.
3. Where a high-quality water is designated as an “outstanding resource water,” the water quality and uses of that water must be maintained and protected.

Why protect water quality if the standards are not being violated?

There are many reasons why it is wise to prevent unnecessary deterioration in water quality even if standards would not be violated. The reasons include:

1. Uncertainty exists about whether the criteria have been set at fully protective levels;
2. Small changes in the quality of aquatic habitat can be detrimental; and
3. Once pollution levels reach the maximums allowed in the water quality standards, there is no more room for future pollution, thus creating higher costs for future human activities.

Will the antidegradation process prevent all future discharges of pollutants?

No, it does not directly prohibit the discharge of all wastewater or polluted runoff. A key element of the proposed plan is the requirement to carefully evaluate and carry out all reasonable options that will reduce or prevent the deterioration of water quality.

Activities that cause pollution, however, may be strictly regulated or even prohibited if they:

- would cause a violation of water quality standards,
- are found not to be in the public interest, or
- would degrade any waters specifically designated as outstanding resource waters.

Can some waters be protected from future discharge of pollutants?

Yes, the draft rule contains specific eligibility requirements to identify the outstanding resource waters that receive special protection. These would include waters without multiple sources of pollution that are in federal or state parks, monuments, preserves, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, etc. Such waters would need to be nominated as outstanding resource waters and reviewed through a public process, and then designated by rule in the water quality standards. For waters placed into this highest category of protection, no new sources of water quality deterioration would be allowed.

How do I learn more?

To learn more about the proposed antidegradation section, contact Mark Hicks at (360) 407-6477 or visit our web site at www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/swqs. To obtain copies of focus sheets or discussion documents, or to be added to the mailing list, contact Andrew Kolosseus at (360) 407-7543. To receive electronic updates on the water quality standards revisions, send an e-mail message to swqs@ecy.wa.gov, with "Subscribe" as the subject heading.

If you have special accommodation needs, contact Ann Butler at (360) 407-6480. The TTY number is 711 or 1-800-833-6388.